

'Red Violin' event a warm gathering of old friends

By **JOSEPH DALTON**, Special to the Times Union

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LAKE LUZERNE -- Read the biographies of more than a few classical musicians, and they all start to sound alike. But one phrase in the standard write up on Elizabeth Pitcairn jumps out, stating that she performs "in partnership" with her violin. Her Web site (<http://www.elizabethpitcairn.com>) goes even further and calls the instrument "her life's most inspiring mentor and friend."

Pitcairn's beloved fiddle may be the most famous on earth. A 1720 Stradivarius, it's known as the "Red Mendelssohn" and its mysterious history inspired the 1998 film "The Red Violin" by Francois Girard, with an Academy Award-winning score by John Corigliano. Both violin and violinist were showcased Monday night in the final concert of the Luzerne Chamber Music Festival.

Pitcairn may tote a priceless instrument, but she otherwise carries little pretense. She's an alumna of the Luzerne Music Center and was joined by its cofounder Toby Blumenthal at the piano. The recital felt like a reunion of friends, with plenty of warm feelings and even some chatting back and forth from stage to audience.

Once Pitcairn got around to performing a couple of famous show pieces, it was obvious that the illustrious instrument is in skilled hands. During Saint-Saens' Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso, a rich clear sound filled the rafters of the rather makeshift concert hall. There was personality to spare in Sarasate's "Carmen Fantasy," which closed the night.

The Luzerne community is still mourning its founder, violinist Bert Phillips, a member of the Philadelphia Orchestra who died in October at age 73. His name came up repeatedly and the Andante movement of Schubert's Piano Trio No. 2 in E flat Major was performed in his memory. Cellist Jacob Braun joined Pitcairn and Blumenthal for a fine reading that balanced delicate textures with a propulsive energy.

The same players opened the concert with the Brahms Piano Trio No. 2 in C Major, Op. 87. The performance seemed to strangely dwell in the midrange of the instruments, and thus the dark and stormy nature of the score was emphasized. The Scherzo, a kind of ghost dance, was particularly captivating as it crescendoed into a more singing quality.

After intermission came a portion of a documentary on Pitcairn's instrument and just why Stradivarius is the gold standard for violins. It's included on a recent DVD reissue of "The Red Violin."

Joseph Dalton is a local freelance writer who contributes regularly to the Times Union.

Concert review

"THE RED VIOLIN EXTRAVAGANZA"

When: 8 p.m. Monday

Where: Luzerne Chamber Music Festival, Lake Luzerne

Length: Two hours, 15 minutes with one intermission